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Firms' rules put smokers under fire

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BODY:

When Motorola banned smoking from its electronics plant in Chandler, Ariz., in 1987, computer programmer Dave Brenton decided he would have to give it up.

His job, that is, not his habit. "When the day drew near, I left," says Brenton, who started a group of angry smokers to fight increased restrictions. American Smokers Alliance has 2,500 members.

Brenton's reaction to his ex-employer's smoking policy is unusual, but his situation isn't. Since 1986, when the Surgeon General cited "passive" smoking as a cause of lung cancer in non-smokers, lighting up in public has become as socially acceptable as playing a boom box in a library. Nowhere has opposition to smoke been more apparent than in the workplace. Surveys by the American Society for Personnel Administration found 54% of companies restricted smoking in 1987, up from 36% a year earlier. Today, 60% of companies restrict smoking - and 24% of those ban it from the workplace, according to the Smoking Policy Institute, a Seattle consulting firm.

Along with non-smoking policies has come a profound shift in corporate culture and a case of culture shock for many of the nation's 50 million smokers. Type-A managers with overflowing ashtrays were once admired for their work habits. Now many feel shunned because of their nicotine habit. As evidence of health risks continues to pile up, the unspoken question at many companies is, "If you're so smart, why don't you quit?"

"I think smokers are increasingly ashamed of their habit," says Charles Porter, a pipe smoker and the executive vice president of The Putnam Funds in Boston. "It says, 'I have an addiction that's bad for me, yet I do it anyway.'"

Peer pressure cleared the air at The Putnam Funds. In 1980, about 10 of the 40 people at the firm's bi-weekly financial strategy meetings would light up. Today, no one does. "No one ever said a word to me, but it became apparent that it was no longer acceptable," Porter says. Non-smokers got the message across with half-joking tactics, such as moving ashtrays to the opposite end of the table from a smoker. Although Putnam doesn't have a formal smoking rule, smoke also disappeared from the lunchroom, leaving private offices as the last sanctuary. That's where Porter lights up.

Of course, you can still find a few smoke-filled rooms in corporate America. But they're an endangered species. "Most people - non-smokers are clearly in the majority - think we're crazy," says George Page, executive editor of the TV series *Nature*, which is produced by WNET in New York.

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Smokers are feeling heat because of:

- Health concerns. A 1989 Environmental Protection Agency report called tobacco smoke "a major source of indoor air pollution." Doctors estimate that passive smoking in the workplace causes as many as 5,000 lung cancer deaths a year among non-smokers. Tobacco tars can remain in a non-smoker's lungs for five months. Closing the door to a smoker's office only limits peak exposure, not the average intake of carcinogens over the long term, the EPA says. Tobacco companies argue that the harmful effects haven't been proven, but most employers figure that's not the point. To be on the safe side and to head off possible lawsuits from non-smoking employees, they're banning or limiting smoking in the workplace.

- Corporate performance. Smoking costs companies about \$ 65 billion a year in absenteeism and higher health-care bills, according to the Office of Technology Assessment. A four-year study by Control Data Corp. found that pack-a-day smokers generated insurance claims 18% higher than non-smokers. Tobacco lobbyists say the results are skewed because a disproportionate share of smokers work dangerous blue-collar jobs.

- Personal image. At some companies, smokers are fighting an image problem. More and more they're perceived as being weak-willed for continuing to smoke. At companies where smoking is limited to designated areas, workers must take a break to visit the "sin bin," linking tobacco with a poor work ethic. Smoking also is increasingly associated with lower skill levels; 35.7% of high school dropouts smoke vs. 16.3% of college graduates.

When the boss is a fitness buff, restrictions on smoking are likely to be strict, policy consultants say. Take Packaging Corp. of America in Chicago. President Monte Haymon, an ex-smoker and marathon runner, says the policy at corporate headquarters reflects his personal philosophy: Don't do it on the job. That makes non-smoking "tantamount to a condition of employment," Haymon says. The company also provides a gym and a health food cafeteria for the 250 headquarters workers. "We think that (healthy employees) translate into efficiency and productivity in the workplace," Haymon says.

When a company adopts a smoking policy, few smokers choose to do what computer programmer Brenton did. Employment services say that only about 1% of their clients look for new jobs because they couldn't live with the smoking policy at their previous offices. In fact, smokers would rather switch than fight. Enrollment in stop-smoking classes increases sharply when a company adopts restrictions, the Smoking Policy Institute says.

During the 1980s, several companies took strict measures: They quit hiring smokers. Northern Life Insurance Co. in Seattle pared the number of smoking employees to nine, down from 50 in 1983, with a hiring ban. "We were always told that's a legal form of discrimination," President Robert Pugmire says. But such extreme policies are becoming more controversial. Last year, Oregon adopted a law protecting smokers' right to work, and 11 other states are considering similar measures.

Whether smokers' rights laws pass or not, the smoking habit is likely to remain socially unacceptable. Says management consultant Christopher Hegarty, "I believe that by the end of the century it will be considered a terrible, terrible thing for people to smoke."

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CUTLINE: BRENTON: Former employee of Motorola left job fuming and started group to fight restrictions.

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